



T E X A S S E N A T O R



EDDIE LUCIO, JR.

87th Texas Legislative Session

OPEN LETTER TO CONSTITUENTS OF SENATE DISTRICT 27 Residents of Cameron, Hidalgo, Willacy, Kenedy, & Kleberg Counties



Dear Friends,

This past interim has been unlike any I have ever experienced since first coming to the Legislature in 1987. When the 86th Legislature adjourned two years ago, I was looking forward to overseeing and building on the important work we did on school finance, disaster relief, and other critical topics for Texans' wellbeing.

Of course, our focus shifted rapidly with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic last March. In those early days of this public health crisis, the Senate got directly to work identifying ways the state could help stem the tide of the coronavirus, send out information and aid to our constituents, and continue to conduct the business of Texas safely. Over the spring and summer, I served with my Senate colleagues on two workgroups related to food security and educational continuity, two subjects of immediate importance to millions of Texans. In the meantime, I worked with my staff to reconfigure my state offices to continue to serve my constituents in this most difficult time.

COVID-19 has affected all aspects of our lives, causing us to prioritize distance over closeness, safety over convenience, and the health of our communities and loved ones over all else. Last spring, various state and local agencies began recommending and enforcing precautions to slow the spread of the coronavirus, efforts that were made in an environment where speed was of the essence. In the meantime, legislative committees continued to meet to develop more permanent, deliberative solutions to balance safety with minimizing unnecessary disruptions to Texans' lives, as well as to provide needed support for those hit hardest by the pandemic.

To accomplish this work, I was honored to have been named the Vice Chair of the Senate Committee on Finance, the committee tasked with crafting our state budget. This was an especially critical session for the budget, given that the economic slowdown that accompanied the pandemic gave us less money than usual to work with—just when Texans need support the most. Fortunately, a combination of a better-than-expected estimate of our available revenue and billions of dollars in federal support allowed us to develop and unanimously pass a budget that meets the goals of maintaining critical funding for education and other priorities, supporting our economy, and granting needed aid to cities, counties, and individuals to overcome COVID-19.

Throughout the session, my office has remained as open as possible within the evolving public health guidelines to ensure the safety of my constituents. As the Legislature continues to consider measures that affect you, I encourage you to remain in touch with me to share what issues are important to you, which proposals you support, and which you oppose. I will continue to be your voice in Austin as we navigate these difficult days and emerge stronger than ever—because we're all in this together!

Sincerely,

Eddie Lucio, Jr.
State Senator, District 27

Senator Lucio is Vice Chairman of the Senate Committee on Finance; Vice Chairman of the Senate Committee on Education; Member of the Senate Committees on Natural Resources and Economic Development and on State Affairs; Member of the Select Committees on Redistricting and on Texas Ports; and Member of the Special Committee on Constitutional Issues. He also sits on the Sunset Advisory Commission, on the DSHS COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Advisory Panel, and on the DSHS Task Force of Border Public Health Officials as an ex-officio member.

FIGHTING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Before the Legislature convened for the 87th Session, Senator Lucio, along with the Chair of the Senate Committee on Health and Human Services, Senator Lois Kolkhorst, was named to the Expert Vaccine Allocation Panel. This panel was formed to make recommendations to the Commissioner of Health, Dr. John Hellerstedt, on vaccine distribution across Texas. This included methods for distribution, where vaccines should go, and what priority should be given when allocating vaccines.

As the pandemic wore on, state and local governments found ways to better coordinate and adapt to the challenges posed by the coronavirus. In many cases, the Legislature was able to put these best practices into law so that they can be continued and spread throughout the state as we seek to overcome this deadly pandemic. One example is **Senate Bill 464**, which Senator Lucio authored to increase coordination between local health authorities and health departments to ensure pandemic-related data is being appropriately shared to inform local decision-making.

Senator Lucio also passed several bills that will carry forward these best practices for use during other disasters that the state may face in the future. **Senate Bill 462**, for example, will allow the state to reimburse school districts for miles driven to deliver meals to students when schools are closed, a successful practice pioneered by Valley schools last spring. **Senate Bill 1919** updates statute to allow county tax offices to conduct certain hearings through a videoconference platform like Zoom, increasing convenience for taxpayers. And **House Bill 2087** codifies the high standards of the Texas Workforce Commission's subsidized childcare program created during the pandemic, so that more Texas workers will have access to high-quality childcare going forward.

Throughout the pandemic, first responders continued to provide their services to the communities that they support. At the time when Texas was terrified the most, first responders were required to be on the front lines, face to face with individuals, often in physically demanding roles that made proper mask use difficult and carried a high risk of infection. Senator Lucio, by joint-authoring **Senate Bill 22**, recognized their dedication to the job and ensured they and their families are taken care of if they contract COVID-19. This legislation states that if a first responder contracted COVID-19, it is presumed to have been contracted in the line of duty, providing the first responder and their families full benefits for illness or death.

COVID-19 also took its toll on small businesses across the state, which were devastated by being unable to operate. In addition, when they were able to operate, many small businesses had to implement new policies and procedures to keep themselves and their customers safe. While the federal government did offer many small business loans, the money did not flow fast enough for many small businesses to take advantage of it. So that these businesses could receive loans faster, Senator Lucio co-authored **Senate Bill 678**, which establishes a revolving line of credit to small businesses in need during disasters.

During the COVID lockdown, many people felt isolated. They sought out their churches for prayer and spiritual healing to get through this tough time, only to find the doors closed due to lockdown restrictions. **House Bill 1239**, which Senator Lucio was proud to co-sponsor, exempted religious services from mandated closures during emergencies, when the comfort of religious fellowship is needed most. In addition to ensuring places of worship remained open, the Legislature also ensured that those in hospitals can have a designated caregiver visit during their stay with **Senate Bill 25**.

BUDGETING FOR THE NEEDS OF TEXANS

For the 87th Legislative Session, Senator Lucio was appointed as Vice Chair of the powerful Senate Committee on Finance, thus becoming the only senator to serve as Vice Chair of two standing committees. The Finance Committee is primarily tasked with crafting the state's budget, an enormous document that allocates nearly a quarter of a trillion dollars to various state agencies over the two-year budget cycle. In addition, the committee also takes up legislation relating to taxes, pension systems, and other related topics.

For the 2022-2023 budget, Vice Chair Lucio shared Chairwoman Jane Nelson's four priorities:

1. Continuing public education funding increases from last session's House Bill 3;
2. Providing resources to defeat COVID-19;
3. Stimulating the economy following the pandemic; and
4. Maintaining public safety.

Senate Bill 1, the budget joint-authored by Senator Lucio and passed out of the Senate unanimously, meets all of these priorities while continuing to make progress in supporting healthcare, education, and infrastructure in Texas. Some major highlights include:

- Maintaining public school funding, including nearly \$2 billion for enrollment growth;
- Allocating \$8.4 billion across 25 state agencies to fund behavioral health programs;

- Granting pay raises to state law enforcement officers totaling \$140 million; and
- Dedicating over \$1 billion across all agencies to support border security.

In addition to his role as Vice Chair, Senator Lucio was also appointed to two important work groups that made recommendations for Articles II and III of the budget, which fund Texas' efforts in health and human services and education, respectively. Together, these two articles make up nearly two-thirds of the \$248.6 billion budget.

Texas has also received billions of dollars in federal relief for the coronavirus pandemic, including over \$11 billion that was released directly to Texas school districts during the regular session. Additional federal funds are allocated at the discretion of the Legislature to further help schools, healthcare systems, and communities safeguard Texans against COVID-19.



Senator Lucio discusses legislation with Senator Brian Birdwell (R-Granbury) in the historic Senate Chamber.

Developing Ports And Trade

The ports in Senate District 27 are not only vital to the economic development of our region, but are also of great importance to the entire state. This session, Senator Lucio secured the passage of two important bills that reaffirm the state's commitment to South Texas ports, strengthen their ability to attract industry, and enhance economic development opportunities.

Senator Lucio authored **Senate Bill 635**, which reorganizes the Port of Harlingen by increasing the size of its Board of Commissioners from three elected members to five, ensuring more diverse representation among residents, removing Willacy County from Port boundaries, and giving greater autonomy to the Commission in collecting the taxes imposed, thereby holding the elected Commissioners directly accountable to the voters.

Senator Lucio also authored **Senate Bill 1315**, which clarifies legislative intent that industry in our ports should not be taxed on their leasehold interests in port property if they are engaged in "navigation-related commerce." The bill creates uniformity across the state by identifying specific activities that are to be considered when county appraisal districts make their assessment determinations. This much-needed uniformity will keep our ports economically competitive and attract even more industry to our region.

Agriculture and international trade are the backbone of District 27's economy. This session, Senator Lucio supported two bills aimed at keeping our region strong in these areas. He sponsored **House Bill 1371**, which extends the Trade Agricultural Grant Program until 2025. This grant program promotes trade by reducing backups and long wait times at federal inspection sites. By extending this grant program, consumers across Texas and the nation will retain access to low-cost, high-quality produce brought across the border.

Senator Lucio also co-authored **Senate Bill 2243**, which eliminates duplicative permitting processes for the expansion of international bridges. By aligning the state permitting process to existing federal standards, this bill removes excessive red tape that prevented local governments from completing needed improvements to their bridges. This time and cost-saving measure will ensure that our bridges can adapt to the rapidly changing international commerce landscape that is so important to our communities.

Supporting Our Veterans

Every session is an opportunity for Senator Lucio to support the veterans of his district. In the 87th Legislative Session, he authored two pieces of legislation to help veterans across the state. Many veterans seek VA claims assistance through their Veteran County Service Office, whose on-the-ground experience helps them tailor their services to local communities. Unfortunately, these offices often lack the funding needed to provide some basic but critical functions. Senator Lucio authored **Senate Bill 456**, which added these offices to the list of entities eligible for receiving juror stipend donations. These optional contributions will go a long way in providing assistance to local veteran communities.

As veterans know, a battle buddy is more than just somebody who has your back while deployed; they have your back for all of life's problems. Recognizing the importance of this special relationship, Senator Lucio



Senator Lucio honors constituents in his Capitol office in Austin.

authored **Senate Bill 460**, which recognizes the 11th of every month as "Buddy Check Day," a day every month when veterans are encouraged to connect not only with their former battle buddy, but any other veterans they know. The bill promotes conversations among veterans in a hope to connect them with the services to which they are entitled, or to get in touch with their local veteran communities.

The Legislature also took important steps in helping military families. Senator Lucio co-sponsored **House Concurrent Resolution 51**, urging Congress to pass the I Am Vanessa Guillen Act, which would require independent investigators to investigate missing service members, and create a confidential method to report sexual harassment. Senator Lucio also joint-authored **Senate Bill 611**, which closed a loophole for surviving spouses to receive a property tax exemption if their spouse died in the line of duty.

Honoring Our Heritage

The Valley is home to a storied history and a blend of vibrant cultures that is unlike anywhere else in the world. Senator Lucio passed bills to highlight the heroes of our past and the culture of our present as the Valley looks to its future.

With **Senate Bill 787**, Senator Lucio renamed a stretch of Farm-to-Market Road 1479 as "Bobby Morrow Memorial Highway," to honor the legendary sprinter, Olympic medalist, and Valley native Bobby Morrow. Renaming this road will preserve the memory of this great and humble Texan for posterity.

Senator Lucio also sponsored **House Concurrent Resolution 67**, which designates April 6 as Tejano Day in the state of Texas. This date marks the occasion of Tejano leaders' first declaration of Texas independence in 1813, and will be recognized across Texas with appropriate cultural celebrations commemorating the roles of Tejanos throughout our state's history.

Strengthening Local Infrastructure

In an area prone to flooding like the Valley, our region's drainage districts play an important role in averting natural disasters. Senator Lucio sponsored **House Bill 4454** to help the Willacy County Drainage District No. 2 by aligning statute with its important duties.

Senator Lucio also co-authored **Senate Bill 507**, which will facilitate the expansion of broadband internet infrastructure in technologically underserved areas, such as rural and low-income communities. As Texans rely on the internet for more reasons than ever before, SB 507 will clear the way for equipment that will help them connect quickly and reliably.

EDUCATION

Students returning to the classroom following COVID-related school closures face many obstacles to academic achievement, from learning loss to mental and emotional consequences of the pandemic. School counselors are one of the most vital resources for schools to help students overcome these challenges and remain on track to graduation and further success. To help counselors better address student needs, Senator Lucio authored **Senate Bill 179**, which directs counselors to spend 80% of their work day engaging in actual counseling duties rather than administrative tasks. This is a long-time priority item for school counselors, who believe SB 179 will help them better serve all Texas students.



Vice Chair Lucio and Chairman Larry Taylor (R-Galveston) greet a witness in the Senate Education Committee.

The pandemic put special barriers in the way of achievement for students in certain specific populations, including emergent bilingual students and students with disabilities – two groups that bills passed by Senator Lucio directly address. **Senate Bill 560**, which Senator Lucio authored, directs the Texas Education Agency to develop a strategic plan to increase the number and quality of bilingual educators in the state, so that students learning English will have highly-qualified teachers helping them master this new language. Additionally, **House Bill 159**, which Senator

Lucio sponsored, makes important improvements to the preparation of regular education teachers to include material on teaching students with special needs. Specific instruction on the needs of these students will help new teachers close the achievement gap for students with disabilities.

Two bills by Senator Lucio relating to school sports aim to maintain an inclusive atmosphere for all student athletes. **House Bill 2721** lays out strong penalties for any student athlete who assaults a referee or official during competition, up to and including a permanent ban from University Interscholastic League activities. Meanwhile, **Senate Bill 776** creates an inclusive sports program, which will allow students with special needs and their regular education peers to compete and collaborate together in a few selected athletic or other extra-curricular events.

Senator Lucio also passed two bills that will improve Texas' dropout recovery programs, which provide a second chance for students who have dropped out of high school to take the classes necessary to receive a diploma. **Senate Bill 879** extends these programs' ability to serve students as young as 16 who have dropped out of high school, while **House Bill 572** directs the Texas Education Agency to study alternative methods of evaluating the performance of these non-traditional students.

Senator Lucio was also central to successful efforts to continue improving our school finance system, including by co-sponsoring **House Bill 1525**. Building on last session's momentous school finance reform, HB 1525 makes a number of updates to solidify those reforms while adding new funding and programs to help address COVID-19 and its associated learning loss. Senator Lucio also sponsored separate legislation, **House Bill 189**, that will grant added accountability for charter schools by preventing them from giving out excessive severance packages to departing administrators.

HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Healthcare has always been one of Senator Lucio's top priorities. This session was marked by great accomplishments in lowering healthcare costs. Insulin copays have kept life-saving medication out of the hands of those who need it, forcing families to choose between vital medication and putting food on the table. Senator Lucio was proud to joint-author **Senate Bill 827**, which limits the copay amount of insulin products to \$25 a month. This legislation will save lives.

Senator Lucio will continue to support Medicaid expansion, but until then, there is still a need to provide services to qualifying Medicaid recipients as quickly as possible. To help this effort, he authored **Senate Bill 1921**. This legislation allows providers to receive reimbursement immediately upon a patient's qualification of Medicaid, instead of waiting for the enrollment to be processed. With **House Bill 133**, which Senator Lucio co-sponsored, the Legislature also continued to improve healthcare programs by including new mothers in Medicaid managed care. This will provide participants in the Healthy Texas Women Program better care with less red tape.

The Legislature also made it easier for the elderly to reenroll in SNAP benefits. Many people, especially the elderly, who are eligible for SNAP benefits are unable to take advantage of the program because of a complicated

registration process and the need to frequently reenroll. **Senate Bill 224**, which Senator Lucio co-authored, extends the enrollment period to 36 months, simplifies the application, and removes reporting requirements. This will not only make it easier to enroll, but also improve the reenrollment process so people are not removed from services for a simple mistake on a form. Another bill by Senator Lucio that will help senior citizens is **Senate Bill 1917**, which directs the Texas Department of Health and Human Services to create a Visual Impairment Outreach campaign.

Medicinal cannabis has the potential to help many Texans with their medical conditions. However, the compassionate use program has been extremely limited in the conditions that are allowed to receive a prescription. The amount of THC allowed was also so low that many people believed it was not living up to its potential benefits. **House Bill 1535** expanded the compassionate use program to allow patients to receive a prescription for medical cannabis for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and all types of cancer, not just terminal cancer. In addition, it raised the concentration from .5 percent to 1 percent and allowed its use for research. These changes will allow doctors to prescribe an additional medication that many with these conditions find extremely beneficial at reducing their symptoms.

SUNSET AND REDISTRICTING

Over the previous interim, Senator Lucio was appointed to the Sunset Commission and the Redistricting Committee, two bodies that are important to the operation of state government by overseeing the operation of state agencies and redrawing Texas' congressional and legislative districts. Through his service on both entities, Senator Lucio is well-positioned to give a voice to the Valley in these critical areas.

The Teacher Retirement System of Texas (TRS) is one of the largest public pension systems in the world. However, many retirees and current educators reported having trouble receiving accessible information about their accounts or taking advantage of the benefits to which they were entitled. Following the Sunset Commission's review of TRS, Senator Lucio sponsored **House Bill 1585**, which updates the system's member outreach efforts and simplifies several aspects of law related to employment after retirement. With these reforms, teachers will have better access to information about their pensions both before and after retirement, and will be better able to avoid making employment decisions that could jeopardize their annuities.

Senator Lucio also authored **Senate Bill 705** to continue the Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC), which is

responsible for ensuring livestock in the state of Texas are free from disease. In addition to its continuation, the TAHC Sunset bill increased efficiencies to save the commission money while keeping the standards Texans expect from a great livestock industry. Both ranchers and consumers of their products will benefit from the important reforms in this Sunset bill.

The drawing of new districts for Texas' congressional representation and state legislative districts is one of the most important duties prescribed to the Legislature by the U.S. Constitution. Ensuring all Texans have fair and responsive representation is critical to the success of our democracy. As a member of the Senate Committee on Redistricting, Senator Lucio is committed to crafting new maps that give South Texas the voice it deserves on both the state and federal levels.

Unfortunately, due to delays resulting from the pandemic, the data required to begin the drawing of maps was not available to the Legislature in time for them to consider redistricting during the regular legislative session. Nevertheless, the committee began holding informational meetings at the start of the regular session, and will continue to meet in special session as more data becomes available.

WINTER STORM RECOVERY

In February of this year, Texans were faced with yet another unprecedented event—a historic winter freeze that left many without utilities for days and resulted in over 200 deaths. Senator Lucio was devastated to learn that his constituents, friends, and neighbors did not have access to power, heat, food, or adequate shelter. What started off as planned rolling blackouts turned into a nightmare for Texans, many of whom are still recovering from that week even today. Since then, Senator Lucio has worked with ERCOT, energy providers, and local and state officials to ensure that we know exactly what happened, to help those affected directly, and to ensure that something like this never happens again.

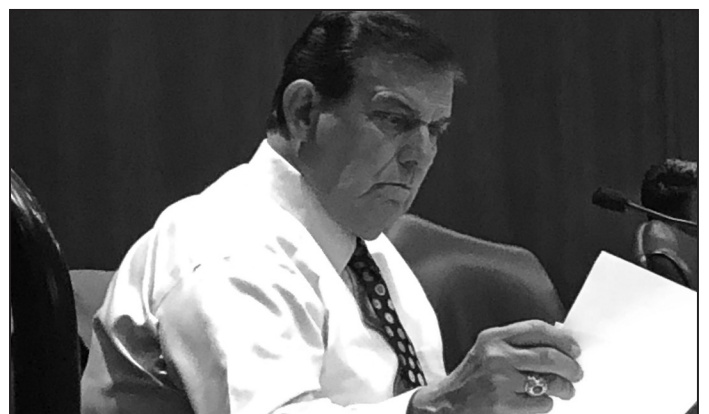
While there is still much work to be done, Senator Lucio was proud to immediately co-author **Senate Bill 2154**, which will reorganize the Public Utility Commission (PUC). The PUC is the state agency in charge of oversight for Texas' electric grid. Among the reforms in this bill, the PUC will now have five governor-appointed commissioners, the commissioners must be Texas residents, and at least two of the commissioners must be well-informed and qualified in the field of public utilities and utility regulation. This last requirement will ensure that at least three of the five members are not chosen from the public utility industry, leaving room for finance and legal experts. These changes will ensure that more viewpoints are taken into account during the agency's decision-making process.

SUPPORTING LAW ENFORCEMENT

Following last summer's outcry for police reform, the Texas Legislature took a balanced approach that supports law enforcement and institutes important measures to ensure accountability. As the son of a longtime law enforcement officer, Senator Lucio was supportive of measures that provide officers with needed resources while preventing and punishing bad behavior.

As public servants, police officers must meet a high standard of conduct when discharging their duties, which were clarified by two bills that Senator Lucio co-authored: **Senate Bill 69**, which prohibits the use of deadly chokeholds, and **Senate Bill 2212**, which requires officers to render aid to injured bystanders when doing so would not put their safety at risk. Senator Lucio also co-authored **Senate Bill 24**, a priority bill that ensures officers with past records of unacceptable behavior cannot move to a new department to escape the consequences of their dangerous or illegal actions.

The Legislature also, through **Senate Bill 2222**, appropriated money to protect officers in the line of duty through the purchase of rifle-resistant windshields. For former officers who were grievously injured in the line of duty, the Legislature passed **Senate Bill 1071**, which offers enhanced disability retirement benefits to help them handle the costs of long-term care. Senator Lucio was a co-author of both of these bills that support law enforcement.



Senator Lucio considers proposed legislation in the Senate State Affairs Committee.

NOVEMBER 2021 CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT ELECTION

This November, Texans will have the opportunity to approve the following amendments to the Texas Constitution with a majority vote. A condensed “Analyses of Proposed Constitutional Amendments” may be found on the “Publications” tab of the Texas Legislative Council’s website at www.tlc.texas.gov.

Proposition 1 (HJR 143): “The constitutional amendment authorizing the professional sports team charitable foundations of organizations sanctioned by the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association or the Women’s Professional Rodeo Association to conduct charitable raffles at rodeo venues.”

Proposition 2 (HJR 99): “The constitutional amendment authorizing a county to finance the development or redevelopment of transportation or infrastructure in unproductive, underdeveloped, or blighted areas in the county.”

Proposition 3 (SJR 27): “The constitutional amendment to prohibit this state or a political subdivision of this state from prohibiting or limiting religious services of religious organizations.”

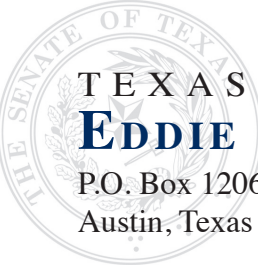
Proposition 4 (SJR 47): “The constitutional amendment changing the eligibility requirements for a justice of the supreme court, a judge of the court of criminal appeals, a justice of a court of appeals, and a district judge.”

Proposition 5 (HJR 165): “The constitutional amendment providing additional powers to the State Commission on Judicial Conduct with respect to candidates for judicial office.”

Proposition 6 (SJR 19): “The constitutional amendment establishing a right for residents of certain facilities to designate an essential caregiver for in-person visitation.”

Proposition 7 (HJR 125): “The constitutional amendment to allow the surviving spouse of a person who is disabled to receive a limitation on the school district ad valorem taxes on the spouse’s residence homestead if the spouse is 55 years of age or older at the time of the person’s death.”

Proposition 8 (SJR 35): “The constitutional amendment authorizing the legislature to provide for an exemption from ad valorem taxation of all or part of the market value of the residence homestead of the surviving spouse of a member of the armed services of the United States who is killed or fatally injured in the line of duty.”



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Senator Lucio converses with Senators Royce West (D-Dallas), Lois Kolkhorst (R-Brenham), and Paul Bettencourt (R-Houston) on the Senate floor.

TEXAS SENATOR **EDDIE LUCIO, JR.**

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